# The Next Black President

Ta-Nehisi Coates June 15, 2026

Kamala Harris's quest for the White House was rooted in a political tradition of nonviolence pioneered by black women. In the wake of Gaza, the broad promise of that tradition proved too much for her to bear. As the question of another run looms, Ta-Nehisi Coates reckons with the implicit violence of the American presidency—and the conditions under which a black woman might ever hold that office.

**CAPITOL INTERESTS** Fannie Lou Hamer (left) cofounded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 to dismantle Mississippi's segregated delegation.Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

The patron saint of the 2024 Democratic National Convention was Fannie Lou Hamer—recalcitrant sharecropper turned agitator and, like the Democratic presidential nominee, a black woman. Hamer worked on the plantation of W.D. Marlow near Ruleville, Mississippi—laboring in the fields, cleaning the Marlow manse, and keeping the family's records. All this, estimates Hamer biographer Kate Clifford Larson, earned her "between $600 and $800 a year, less than half of what white farm families earned in 1948."

This was by design—the mandate of Mississippi's ruling class was assured through the reduction of the state's black residents to near slavery. Hamer took her revenge: She wore the Marlows' fine clothes while they were away. She stole their perfume. She bathed in their tub. She used the family's spoons and then watched them eat behind her. It was said that Hamer "didn't have real good sense," that she was

“uppity,” and filled with “gripes.” But, as Larson recounts, Hamer’s own analysis hinted at something deeper—“I was rebelling in the only way that I could rebel.”

**IN THE TRADITION** Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee workers at the funeral of four girls killed in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963.Danny Lyon/Magnum

In 1962, the rebellion was joined. That was the summer that a bevy of civil rights workers descended on Hamer’s Sunflower County seeking volunteers to help register blacks to vote. Hamer signed up and, through her courage, charisma, and oratory, quickly drew ardent disciples and ruthless adversaries. In 1963, Hamer was arrested, jailed, and at the behest of her white captors, beaten with a blackjack by two African American inmates. She emerged from captivity grievously injured but recalcitrant as ever.

A year later Hamer cofounded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, aiming to displace the segregated delegation to that year’s Democratic convention. This was a problem. Lyndon B. Johnson feared that Hamer’s protest would cost him Mississippi, or perhaps the entire Deep South. When Hamer testified at the convention, it was televised nationally. A flustered Johnson quickly called an impromptu press conference to knock “that illiterate woman,” as he would reportedly call Hamer, off the air. The evening news broadcast Hamer’s testimony anyway.

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“If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America,” Hamer told the convention. “Is this America? The land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hook because our lives be threatened daily.” Hamer died in 1977. But she has become a hero, particularly to black women, who see in her an ancient tradition of politics that extends back to their arrival on these shores. That same political tradition, 60 years later, delivered Kamala Harris to the top of the ticket.

In 2020, when many saw in Joe Biden a floundering candidate, a loose coalition of black women activists saw an opportunity. The coalition included, among others, voting rights activist Melanie Campbell, 2024 Democratic National Convention committee chair Minyon Moore, and investor and strategist Jotaka Eaddy. They organized and applied pressure. They demanded a black woman on the ticket. They got it. They demanded a black woman on the Supreme Court. They got it. They demanded a black woman at the Federal Reserve. They got that too. And they got even more. By the end of 2024, Biden had appointed a record number of black women to the federal bench and cut black unemployment and black poverty levels to record lows. He’d passed a temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit, which in its single year of operation reduced black child poverty rates by half. This was an enviable string of political victories. And when Biden withdrew from the campaign and endorsed Harris, the most tantalizing victory of all was at hand. Now the same coalition of black women who could credibly claim the first fulfillment of a black agenda in recent memory pressed their advantage.

During the pandemic, Eaddy created the Google group Win With Black

Women, which began convening Sundays via Zoom.

It became a central organizing node, and the night Harris received Biden's endorsement, Win With Black Women drew some 44,000 attendees. "We didn't hang up until 1 a.m.," recalls Eaddy. "It was a reminder of what was possible, it was a reminder of our power, and it was a reminder of the connection to a struggle, a fight, and quite frankly, that baton that our ancestors had handed to us that we were collectively holding."

No ancestor loomed larger over the convention's proceedings in Chicago than Hamer. Democratic National Committee chair Jaime Harrison invoked her familiar phrase, "We are sick and tired of being sick and tired." The 2024 Mississippi Democratic delegation expressed their pride in representing "heroes such as Fannie Lou Hamer." Maxine Waters praised Hamer and noted she was one of Harris's "heroes." In this, fatefully, Harris and the black women who propelled her to the top of the ticket were not alone.

Ten months earlier, on October 7, Hamas and other allied forces crossed out of Gaza and killed approximately 1,200 people, 800 of whom were civilians. In response, Israel launched a total war against the people of Gaza. In the first 30 days of this assault, Israel killed at least 4,100 children—roughly eight times as many children as Russia killed in 21 months during its war of conquest in Ukraine. It was as if each morning the IDF gathered up five classrooms of students and then erased them. "We are fighting human animals," Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant asserted, "and are acting accordingly."

The arsenal for this war against children, against "human animals,"

was the United States of America. According to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, America supplied 69 percent of Israel's major conventional arms imports between 2019 and 2023 and approved some $20 billion in arms sales to Israel in the weeks leading up to the Democratic National Convention. And the man who held the keys to that arsenal just happened to be one of the most progressive presidents black America has ever known.

Now another coalition—a group of young Democrats at the fringes of the party—looked for a way to bring Gaza to the center of the convention. They organized the Uncommitted National Movement—urging voters to check or write in "uncommitted" on the primary ballot and thus earn delegates of this selfsame line who would then have a presence at the DNC. "We tried our best to replicate Fannie Lou Hamer and the Bus Freedom movement when they went to the DNC," says Uncommitted cochair Layla Elabed. "We literally looked at them and said, 'Okay, how do we apply those lessons and practices to Uncommitted?' "

> *A black presidency is a contradiction—it owes its power to a movement against racist state violence at home but seeks an office which has always practiced racist state violence abroad.*

The Uncommitted campaign settled on a single demand: a Palestinian American speaker to endorse the nominee at the convention. A symbolic re-embrace of Arab Americans would help Uncommitted delegates assure their community members that Harris was indeed

taking their complaints seriously. According to Elabed, the organizers spent that week batting potential names back and forth with the Harris campaign for vetting. The exchange seemed promising. But as name after name was refused—Harris fundraiser Hala Hijazi, Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, Georgia representative Ruwa Romman—Elabed's optimism began to fade. And then on that Wednesday Uncommitted got a call: The call for a Palestinian American speaker was rejected.

It's tough to identify a singular flaw that cost Harris the election. She ultimately won the Arab American vote, but there was a 12 percent swing away from her candidacy compared to Biden in 2020. Of those Democratic voters who broke away from Harris, nearly as many went to a third party as went to Trump. The effect of Gaza on these particular swing voters lingers painfully in the thoughts of Harris's most ardent supporters. "I do believe that there were progressive critiques [to be made] of Harris," says Eaddy. But the sheer fervor of protest from putative allies stunned Eaddy. "I believe that had dire consequences on the result of the election and ultimately where we are as a country right now."

From this perspective, a sector of the Democratic electorate demanded moral perfection of Harris and in the process allowed a completely immoral Donald Trump to return to power. For African Americans, presidential elections have almost always been exercises in lesser evils and harm reduction. Looking at the damage done to America's public health system, a secret police force unleashed on its cities, the indiscriminate bombing of an elementary school, the killing of Alex Pretti and Renee Good, and the lust for extrajudicial killing, the

great disaster of a Trump presidency is all too clear.

But two weeks before Harris accepted the nomination, Israeli media aired footage of guards appearing to rape a Palestinian prisoner. By then, the Israeli government had wiped out roughly 2 percent of Gaza's population—some 40,000 human beings. A letter published in *The Lancet* by three public health researchers estimated that 186,000 Gazan deaths could be attributed to the conflict, including indirect deaths—8 percent of the strip's population. To preserve democracy, Palestinian Americans were being asked to support a member of the administration that repeatedly armed the agents of this carnage.

"I think for a lot of African Americans, we weren't connecting with how visceral the anger was at Biden and [Harris] because of what they were allowing," says journalist Joy Reid. "And because of her sort of political inability to speak directly to the genocide, which I still don't understand, to be honest. I genuinely don't, because I know she's an empathetic person. I've covered this woman for a really long time.... But people just didn't see it and she couldn't voice it. I don't understand it. To this day I cannot explain it."

Perhaps the answer lay in what Harris did say. At the convention, the vice president pledged to "ensure America always has the strongest, most lethal fighting force in the world." This language is fairly boilerplate for most people seeking the presidency. But it is also at odds with the very tradition that brought Harris to the brink. Hamer was a student of nonviolence—and not just for protesters in Mississippi. As early as 1964 she opposed the Vietnam War, horrified at the prospect of American bombs being dropped on a much weaker people half a world away."I am sick of the racist war in Vietnam,"

Hamer said at an antiwar rally in the 1960s, “when we don’t have justice in the United States.”

Perhaps it is naive to expect Harris, a candidate for the American presidency, to speak in the same register as Hamer, who was its antagonist. But it was that very antagonist whom Harris and her party claimed as a champion. The dynamic is familiar—Barack Obama’s claim of Martin Luther King Jr. was similarly incongruent. That is because a black presidency is a contradiction—it owes its power to a movement against racist state violence at home but seeks an office which has always practiced racist state violence abroad.

But what was known in 1964 was largely abandoned in 2024, and what was offered instead was a questionable survivalist theory of democracy—one that proposed to erect a shield over one group while providing weaponry to destroy another. For reasons moral, pragmatic, and perhaps mostly ancestral, the next black presidency will have to think bigger. To its list of adversaries—which include a renewed white supremacy, a rapacious billionaire class, an energetic Christian nationalism—it must add another, perhaps more formidable than them all: empire.

The portrait of America as an imperial power cuts against its self-image as a righteous cradle of democracy. But from its inception, the country has been aggressive and expansionist, seizing land from its Indigenous population, paying off some European powers while menacing others.

“I am persuaded no constitution was ever before so well calculated as

ours for extensive empire & self government," Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison in 1809. Jefferson's "Empire of Liberty," as he dubbed it, steadily expanded across the continent throughout the 19th century and early 20th century, then it turned to the oceans, annexing Hawaii, seizing the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam, then drawing Cuba and the Dominican Republic into its sphere of influence.

Even as the United States expanded its rule, there always remained a dim sense that an Empire of Liberty was a contradiction. The inveterate white supremacist Woodrow Wilson mouthed anti-colonial rhetoric before reverting to form at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. "Wilson spoke eloquently on behalf of smaller nations and their right to self-determination," writes Daniel Immerwahr in his book *How to Hide an Empire*. "Yet he had southeastern European nations in mind."

After World War II, with colonialism considered passé, President Dwight Eisenhower embraced more clandestine means to preserve the United States' imperial reach. President Harry Truman "drew the line at plotting against foreign leaders," writes Stephen Kinzer in his book *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles and Their Secret World War*. "That line evaporated when he left office. Eisenhower wished to wage a new kind of war." Eisenhower's national security team subsequently plotted to overthrow no fewer than three different democracies on three different continents over the course of his eight years. For oil, Iran's Mohammed Mossadegh was toppled in 1953. For fruit plantations, Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz Guzman was deposed in 1954. And in 1960, fearing Congo and its vast resources moving out of the West's sphere of influence, Eisenhower ordered Prime Minister

Patrice Lumumba murdered. The Belgians beat him to it.

Touring the world, a young John F. Kennedy was disturbed to find that America "was definitely classed with the imperialist powers of Europe." Like Wilson, he paid lip service to the anti-colonial spirit and, at his inauguration, pledged support for the Third World "not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right." The Bay of Pigs was three months later.

Kennedy agonized over the failed operation to overthrow Cuba's Fidel Castro, but he quickly made peace with cloak-and-dagger imperialism. His CIA engaged the Mafia to kill Castro (1960); urged a military coup in Brazil (1962), which would bear fruit two years later; helped apartheid-era South Africa locate and arrest Nelson Mandela (1962); and supported the Ba'ath Party in overthrowing the Iraqi government (1963) and crushing its communist opposition. In Vietnam the once anti-colonialist Kennedy first supported Eisenhower's handpicked dictator, Ngo Dinh Diem, then facilitated a coup against him in which he was subsequently killed. When Kennedy was himself killed, a few weeks after Diem, so profligate were his shadow wars that some close to him believed, as Malcolm X said, that the chickens had indeed come home to roost. "Bobby Kennedy himself suspected the killings might be the work of the CIA, the Mob or Castro," writes journalist Vincent Bevins in his book *The Jakarta Method*. "Vice President Lyndon Johnson's first suspicion was that it was retaliation for Diem's murder."

Fears of imperial boomerang did little to restrain Johnson or any other American president. Indeed, what stands out about the horrifying death toll in Gaza is how easily it slots into a history of American

global power. In the same year Johnson pushed through the Voting Rights Act, his CIA helped dispatch the Indonesian president, Sukarno. Up to a million Indonesians were subsequently killed by the military regime, which the United States favored. Four years later, in a bid to crush the Viet Cong, President Richard Nixon secretly carpet-bombed Cambodia, which in turn led to the rise of the genocidal Khmer Rouge. Then in 1973, Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his secretary of state, plotted the overthrow of yet another democracy in Chile, propping up the brutal dictator Augusto Pinochet. This history poses a discomfiting truth: Gaza is not a betrayal of American democratic tradition but an expression of an American imperial tradition.

> *Much as broadcast news in the '60s made it hard for Southern white supremacists to hide their brutality, social media has made it impossible for Israel, and thus the American empire, to hide its own.*

The tradition is literally generational. In 1893, John Watson Foster helped overthrow the queen of Hawaii. Sixty years later, Foster's grandsons, Allen and John Dulles, took up the trade. As heads of the CIA and the State Department, respectively, they engaged Kermit Roosevelt Jr. to overthrow Mossadegh. Roosevelt was himself a scion of the imperial spirit—his grandfather was Theodore Roosevelt, who championed the annexation of the Philippines. The subsequent events are a dizzying whirlwind of horse trading and violence: In 1963 the CIA backs a coup d'etat by the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, which Saddam Hussein

would eventually lead. In 1979 the American-allied shah of Iran is driven from power. In 1980 a frustrated United States backs Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War. In 2003 the United States topples Hussein and delivers him to his executioners. In 2026 the United States collaborates with Israel to kill Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei. The tally? Four different regimes, with four different ideologies, of two opposing countries dispatched at the behest of one imperial power.

The focus on the regime changes inflicted on the Arab world and the Middle East at large obscures the routine violence inflicted on its people. For Americans, the Iraq War is remembered as a case of bad intelligence, and George W. Bush's image has largely been rehabilitated. The estimated 200,000 civilians directly killed on "bad intelligence" less so. In November 2008 an errant air strike, conducted under auspices of a lame-duck Bush administration, killed 37 civilians who were at a wedding party in Wech Baghtu, Afghanistan. "We cannot win the fight against terrorism with air strikes," pleaded Afghanistan's president Hamid Karzai. Five years later, under President Obama, another air strike hit another wedding party, this time in Yemen, killing 12 more people.

With a bipartisan acceptance of innocent death as the cost of doing business in the Muslim and Arab world, it is not a surprise that a kind of casual contempt for its leaders and peoples oozes from the orifices of both Republican and Democratic administrations. In his 2008 presidential campaign, conservatives pushed Obama to repeatedly deny he was a Muslim in roughly the same register as one would deny beating his wife. When the dictator Muammar Qaddafi was dragged out of a drainpipe, sodomized with a bayonet, and killed, Obama's

secretary of state Hillary Clinton shared a laugh with a CBS reporter: "We came. We saw. He died!" In 2023, as the casualty reports out of Gaza mounted, Biden's response was, essentially, to call bullshit—"I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed," Biden said. Gaza's health ministry responded by releasing the names of every single one of the identified dead.

When Biden dropped out and Harris became the nominee, there was reason for hope among the Uncommitted delegates. Off the record, Harris conveyed her deep despair at the scale of atrocity in Gaza. Less than a week into her campaign, she emerged from a meeting with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledging "not to be silent." Moreover, among the coalition of black women who'd backed Harris, there were many who took a dim view of the Israeli state project. Eaddy, whose Win With Black Women call inspired a series (Win With Black Men, White Dudes for Harris, Swifties 4 Kamala), had visited the region in 2014. "What I walked away with was a parallel to the struggle for black Americans," says Eaddy. "I saw things that were very similar."

A call to vote uncommitted at the Michigan Democratic primary.Emily Elconin/*The New York Times*.

During a visit to Bethlehem, LaTosha Brown, cofounder of Black Voters Matter, recalls watching as an Israeli soldier pretended to shoot at a bunch of kids who were playing nearby. "Like they were ducks," she remembers. "Even to this day, I can't take it."

Journalist Tiffany Cross, author of *Love, Me: A Letter to Black Women in a Toxic Country, Career, and Relationship,* visited the region under the auspices of AIPAC. It did not go as her sponsor planned. "Oh, I

know exactly what this is," Cross recalls thinking. "The Palestinians here are treated like black people."

There was a consensus among many of the black women supporting Harris that a Palestinian speaker should have been allowed at the convention. But there also was a deep sense that the 2024 election presented a binary—Trump or Harris—and many in the Arab American community had made the wrong choice. This perspective originates in the basic truth that black people are a minority in a country that, at best, tolerates their existence. And that vulnerability has landed with particular weight on black women.

The very American imperialism that so endangered Muslim life had its roots in genocide and enslavement, the latter of which always took particular interest in black women. At its root, it was a system of rape, industrial in both scale and effect. Enslavement or freedom was passed down to the child through the mother, meaning white men could augment a workforce trafficked from Africa by raping with impunity and enslaving their offspring. "She alone could give birth to a slave," the historian Paula Giddings writes in her book *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. "Blacks constituted a permanent labor force and metaphor that were perpetuated through the Black woman's womb."

Typical of rape survivors, black women were freighted with a particular kind of animus. "Mistresses and masters (and overseers) described slave women as lazier, filthier; more shiftless, slatternly, ignorant and impudent than slave men," writes Thavolia Glymph in her book *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the*

*Plantation Household*. The stereotypes mirrored a real-world disregard for the suffering of black women. Antebellum physician J. Marion Sims is known as the father of modern gynecology. He did this "fathering" by operating on the unanesthetized bodies of enslaved black women and girls.

But if America made black women a uniquely acted-upon class, black women too made themselves a unique class of political actors. Their particular oppression became a particular bond, evidenced in the pressure they were able to bring upon the Biden presidency. And that particular oppression also made the promise of a black woman president something more than another item on a checklist of firsts or the humoring of a particular interest group. "We would bring others along, which has always been the case," says Massachusetts congresswoman Ayanna Pressley. "Even when our full freedoms were not actualized, we made it possible for others' freedoms to be realized."

> *"The average thought of my constituent is, Why the hell are we always bombing some other country?" says Pennsylvania congresswoman Summer Lee.*

In 2020, Cross was part of that early coalition that demanded Biden name a black woman vice presidential nominee. In her mind, the demand was always about something larger. "I think I would hope anyway that this black woman is someone who is going to say the uncomfortable thing," says Cross. "I have to trust that a black woman

could not see tens of thousands of children being murdered and not be struck by that, not be moved by that. Whether you're a mother or not, I trust because we experienced that. We saw firsthand the violence of America, and we've always had to tap into our humanity in a certain way, just for our own very survival."

In 2024 this broad ethic of democracy came into conflict with a more prosaic politic. Harris and her party settled into a somewhat conservative pitch as the party of America before Trump. Perhaps the radical thought of a black woman as president made this approach seem prudent. But for many Arab and Muslim Americans, "America before Trump" meant returning to a time when FBI informants sought to entrap them, when police agencies spied on their mosques, and calling a presidential candidate a Muslim was a slur. Seemingly blind to this trauma, the Harris campaign followed up the Democratic National Convention snub by deploying Bill Clinton to Michigan. There, in the state with the highest concentration of Arab Americans in the country, Clinton told an audience that Israel had been forced "to kill civilians" by Hamas, and that the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea belonged to the Jewish people because "they were there first." Meanwhile, Harris welcomed her endorsement by Dick Cheney, who was not a very popular vice president but was a zealous defender of torturing Muslims. The cumulative message was not "We don't need your vote." It was "We don't value your life."

Elabed recalls a Harris supporter pleading for Elabed to help protect Harris now, on the implicit promise that Harris would protect Palestinian life later. This was not an abstract request—for the Palestinian American Elabed, it meant telling other Palestinian

Americans that they must support a politician who'd pledged to continue to arm the state that was presently annihilating their families. "Who's protecting them?" Elabed recalls wondering. "Who's protecting their families?"

When I was 23 years old, Clinton bombed the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Sudan. American intelligence indicated that Al-Shifa was controlled by Sudan's fundamentalist government and was providing al-Qaida with chemical weapons. The claim quickly collapsed. Like how the 2003 claims of Saddam Hussein's WMDs collapsed. Like how the 1964 claims of a North Vietnamese attack in the Gulf of Tonkin collapsed. I hadn't been a fan of Clinton. Still, given a choice between the party of Jesse Helms and the presidency of Bill Clinton, calculating the "lesser evil" seemed easy. It was a calculation made through the exclusion of the Sudanese people.

In March, I flew to Dublin with my wife, intent on seeing the math with clearer, if older, eyes. I had coffee with 20-year-old Dima Shamaly, an electrical engineering student at University College Dublin. Shamaly is among a cohort of young Gazans admitted to universities in Ireland and granted visas. There is no guarantee that they will ever return to Gaza or anywhere in Palestine. They have no idea when, or whether, they will see their families again.

Shamaly has light brown skin, an irreverent sense of humor, and a loner's mien. Her mother was a social worker. Before he died from wounds sustained in an Israeli air strike, her father worked as an emergency doctor for UNICEF. Shamaly herself had survived such a bombing.

In Dublin, she walked into the small café where we'd arranged to meet, hugged my wife, hugged me, and then she told me, over the course of a conversation:

*I was born in Gaza City. I have two older brothers and a younger sister and a younger brother as well. One is 25. One is 23. I'm 20. My sister is 15 and my younger brother is 11. The best memory I have is going to the sea to talk to all the sailors by the beach. Everyone there knew me. So we would eat some bread, have some tea, and talk. Sometimes they would take me on the boat and go around. But you can't go far, because the Israelis will shoot you.*

*There was like a gifted school in Gaza. It's called Arafat for Gifted Students School in Gaza. It's a mixed school with girls and boys. Before you get in, you have to pass an exam which covers chemistry, biology, math, Arabic, and English. If you pass this exam, you'll go to the interview. Then after the interview, you'll be able to be in the school. So, yeah, that was my school. I finished at the top of my class. I applied to some schools in the US before the war. I got full admission to Vassar College. So I picked Vassar, and I was going to go there. But then the war came and then I wasn't able to get a visa or anything. Then Trump banned Palestinians from going to the US.*

**HER FATHER'S DAUGHTER** Dima Shamaly, shown here in 2024, is a 20-year-old electrical engineering student at University College Dublin, one of a number of young Gazans studying in Ireland. They have no idea whether or when they will see their families again.Courtesy Dima Shamaly

Dima Shamaly with her father in 2014.Courtesy Dima Shamaly.

*To be honest, we all thought that it's just going to be like any other*

*war. It's not going to last that long or it's not going to do anything. But we got displaced like 10 times or something. We were displaced in a house in Nuseirat. We were on the second floor, me and the woman, her name's Kifaya, and her baby. There was no warning and no nothing. They just bombed the house. The last thing I remember is just that everything was red. The sky, the window, all that was red. There was no voice, no sound. I remember when I was under the rubble, I thought I'm actually okay. I thought nothing was wrong. But the moment they got me out, I felt like I couldn't breathe.*

*When I was in the hospital, they told me, "Thank God you're alive" and all that. Then I said, "Okay. What happened?" They said, "Farah is alive," like the baby. Her name is Farah. "And Kifaya is dead." I was just...I don't know. I don't know.... There's guilt. I know it's just not good to feel this way, but it's just the survivor's guilt, this kind of thing. It's like, "Okay, why specifically her? Why did she die and I live? Maybe she's better than me. Well, she's definitely better than me because she's a mother. She has kids and she has a lot of responsibility." These kinds of thoughts. And not just me. I think everyone who experienced this also has these kinds of thoughts.*

*I didn't start school in September, because I was here to do a foundation year, but then I went to the engineering office and I was like, "I don't need a foundation year." I know math and I know English. A foundation year is basically for international students who don't speak the language or who will find it hard to study in a different language. So they give them a year where they have to study basic things. So if you're doing engineering, you'll have basic maths or precalculus and English. So I went to the engineering office and I was*

*like, "You can do whatever. You can test me or interview me." And so I made an interview with them and they asked me a lot of scientific questions, and I passed it. Then they said, "Okay, but you have to wait a month until we approve your application to go straight into engineering."*

*I found out that my father was killed on Facebook. Some of his friends posted that he was a great doctor and all that. He always said, "I'm here for a mission. I'm in this life for a mission. If my mission is over, then my life is not worth anything." I never really understood what he meant, then he was killed and I understood. It's just crazy because he had the chance to leave. When the war started he had offers from the Hungarian government and other places to go out of Gaza and he was like, "No." He even wrote articles about doctors leaving Gaza and how shameful it is. As a daughter, of course I wish we'd left. But as a Palestinian, no.*

When you live as black Americans do, in a constant state of emergency, it can be hard to look across an ocean and see what the long arm of your country is doing to people like Dima. What is already blurry is rendered almost imperceptible by the spectacles of American racism. Because when those whom America kills come to this country, the one sure way for them to advance is to become white, and the one sure way to become white is to put as much distance between oneself and black people as possible. Knowing this, the temptation to adopt a more siloed strategy, one that eschews coalitions with allies who have disappointed us, is strong. This is a very bad idea.

*For Elabed, a Palestinian American, backing*

*Harris meant telling others that they must support a politician who'd pledged to continue to arm the state that was annihilating their families.*

If only because we are a minority, we need the numbers that come from alliances. And then there are certain moments, when a particular issue multiplies the power of certain allies. The Arab American vote is relatively tiny and constrained to a few states. But much as the advance of broadcast news made it hard for Southern white supremacists to hide their brutality, the sweep of social media has made it impossible for Israel, and thus the American empire, to hide its own. And just as the image of black people beaten for trying to cross a bridge resonated beyond our community, the image of a Palestinian hooked up to an IV, writhing in agony and burning alive, resonates far beyond theirs.

This resonance was not appreciated in 2024. A party that was deeply identified with destroying apartheid within its borders attempted to win by ignoring apartheid abroad. It did not work. "There was an underestimation of what was really afoot and how much it meant to so many people from many different walks of life," says Pressley. "And I would say especially the younger generation. And I do believe it is why so many young people just did not participate and stayed home."

There is another way.

In late 2023, as Shamaly and her family fled Gaza City, opinion polls showed African Americans, relative to the rest of the country, believed

Israel should stop its military assault on Gaza. The earliest congressional call for a ceasefire, on October 16, was cosponsored by a black woman—then Missouri congresswoman Cori Bush. Half of her cosigners were black and none were white. In January 2024, a coalition of more than a thousand black pastors called for Biden to press for a ceasefire. The next month, the African Methodist Episcopal Church called for an end to aid to Israel, claiming the United States was supporting "mass genocide."

"The average thought of my constituent is, Why the hell are we always bombing some other country?" says Pennsylvania congresswoman Summer Lee. And there is wisdom in this instinct. "We can't afford health care, we can't afford housing, we can't afford grocery bills, right? All of those things, we're told, are luxuries that if you work hard enough or if you're special enough, you'll get. Well, we spend a billion dollars a day dropping bombs in Iran. So those things are not disconnected."

Lee is pointing to a different tradition of activism, one that does not accept a survivalist democracy in which the lives of one suffering people are balanced against another. We intimately know the perils of this balancing. Indeed, the history of American politics is littered with ostensible golden ages—the Era of Good Feelings, the Roaring Twenties, the postwar '50s—that can only be deemed such by our total exclusion. Out of that knowledge comes a tradition of broader democracy extolled by some of black America's most celebrated heroes.

In 1965, the year of the Voting Rights Act's passage, Coretta Scott King stood before an anti-war rally in Madison Square Garden and

rejected survivalist democracy:

*Have you often wondered as I have, why it is that the same president Johnson who speaks so eloquently for civil rights, and who has been so moved by the struggle for the right to vote and the anguish of the poor, can be so callous about the Vietnamese and so apparently thoughtless on foreign policy. I think it is because we permit him to be.*

King's criticism of the Vietnam War preceded her husband's. It was neither popular with the FBI, which, as political scientist Jeanne Theoharis notes, subsequently labeled her a subversive, nor with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Johnson had already passed two civil rights bills and in 1968 passed another. He was the best president black America had seen in nearly a century. And here was King attacking that very president in the name of a people half a world away. But King's mandate came out of the empathy of having seen her people, and herself, excluded from democracy.

> *"I have to trust that a black woman could not see tens of thousands of children being murdered and not be struck by that, not be moved by that," says journalist Tiffany Cross.*

It is broadly assumed that Harris is planning to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 2028. There are those who would write her off, and perhaps her timidity before America's facilitation of Gaza's destruction has earned that dismissal. But if Harris were interested in

a second act, one rooted not in a failed pragmatism but the courage of the heroes she claims, Fannie Lou Hamer and Coretta Scott King, she would not have to look far for inspiration.

Harris's maternal grandmother was an activist in India, sheltering women from abuse and leading education initiatives for them about contraceptives. Her maternal grandfather was active in the fight for Indian independence. Harris herself was born in Oakland in 1964—the same year Hamer made her stand. The Harrises were intellectual activists, with a keen interest in black struggle and its broader implications. They organized study groups focused on black writers such as Ralph Ellison, Carter G. Woodson, and W.E.B. Du Bois. They debated apartheid and decolonization. They hosted black writers like Amiri Baraka and even Hamer herself. Harris's parents saw Martin Luther King speak together, protested the Vietnam War, and marched for civil rights pushing their firstborn in a stroller.

"These were my mother's people," Harris writes in her memoir *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey*. "From almost the moment she arrived from India, she chose and was welcomed to and enveloped in the black community. It was the foundation of her new American life."

Harris recalls the walls of her day care center as decorated with posters of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. The nursery's matriarch made pound cake and flaky biscuits, and played Aretha Franklin's rendition of "To Be Young, Gifted and Black." She recalls being sent on Sundays to the 23rd Avenue Church of God, where Harris and her sister, Maya, sang in the children's choir. They were reared in a social justice Christianity, which called upon them, according to Harris, to "defend the rights of the poor and needy." This

does not strike me as the biography of someone who needs lectures on the nexus between the black freedom struggle and its import to the broader world. To the contrary, it reads like the story of someone steeped in that knowledge.

And that story forces a very basic question: What was the point of all this? Why the invocations of Tubman, the readings of Du Bois, the visits from Hamer? And did the advocates of this collective pedagogy imagine their children rising to heights of power, only to view the darker nations of the world through the same violent lens as their oppressors? And if they did not, if they believed that the "poor and needy" meant those within the empire as well as those without, then what moral mandate does that place upon their children?

And if their children have come only to praise, not check, empire, then why have they come at all?

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